

from Louisiana (Mr. TAUZIN), and the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. DINGELL) each will control 45 minutes of debate on the bill.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California (Mr. THOMAS).

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

As we begin the 3 hours of debate on the primary bill and an additional hour on the substitute, I do want to indicate that this day, in my opinion, has been too long in coming.

I want to thank President Bush for his position during the campaign that Medicare needed to be modernized and we were overdue for putting prescription drugs in Medicare.

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I believe he has continued to be firm in his resolve that both the House, and the Senate now for the first time, pass legislation so that we can conference a common bill and send it to him for his signature.

I also want to thank the Speaker of the House. The gentleman from Illinois (Mr. HASTERT) was involved in these discussions prior to our becoming the majority and, of course, prior to his becoming Speaker. If you examine H.R. 1, you will find that the Speaker has been willing to be the lead author. I think it is entirely proper and appropriate that the Speaker of the House lead the House through the most fundamental and important change in Medicare since its inception.

I especially want to thank my colleague and friend and chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, the gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. TAUZIN). In this institution, where jurisdictions are guarded with a pretty vicious willingness to have turf wars whenever necessary to hang on to your jurisdiction, the working relationship with the shared jurisdiction of the Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Committee on Ways and Means has been a very pleasant experience, and the working relationship between the staff, of which I will have more to say a little bit later, could not have been better.

And, frankly, the product we have before us, although the gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. TAUZIN) joined me in the initial sponsorship of legislation, we could not have gotten it through both committees and back together again in the Committee on Rules to present to you here today as H.R. 1 without complete and open and very comradely behavior between the chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce and this committee, and I thank him for that.

I especially thank the gentlewoman from Connecticut (Mrs. JOHNSON), who is the chairman of the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Ways and Means. The members of that committee have been very, very helpful in holding the hearings and continuing to shape this legislation. This bill, as it rightly should be, is the best piece of

legislation that we have offered this House, notwithstanding the fact that twice previously we have passed Medicare modernization with prescription drugs.

And let me say that I do want to single out two members of the Committee on Ways and Means, the gentleman from Iowa (Mr. NUSSLE), who also happens to be the chairman of the Committee on the Budget, and the gentleman from North Dakota (Mr. POMEROY), who offered together a bipartisan amendment which was very significant in helping us redress the failure to provide those Americans especially in middle America but in principally rural areas with a fair and equitable Medicare program.

I want to thank, and I do not want to go through every staff member, but I do want to thank the chief of our Subcommittee on Health staff John McManus for the enormous number of hours he and the staff have put in. You cannot produce as complex and difficult a piece of legislation as you have in front of you without the dedicated staff. And I mean not just on the committees, but the Congressional Budget Office, and I will mention from Leg Counsel Ed Grossman, who is an institutional glue. He is the one who spends the hours to make sure that the language makes sense in the legislative language that we have before us. He is absolutely indispensable to the functioning of this institution, and I want to personally thank him once again for the hours of commitment that he has put in to produce this piece of legislation.

There are organizations and associations who have very strong feelings about the direction of Medicare and the changes that might be made, and I want to thank all of them for their openness and willingness to present comments upon which we reacted. Most recently, I think one of the more prominent organizations, formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons, now AARP, and I am indebted to my colleague, the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. CAPPS), for circulating the letter from AARP, because I think it is very instructive. It provides us with an example of how these organizations point with pride and view with alarm some of the changes that are being made.

For example, the opening paragraph in the letter addressed to me says, and I quote, "AARP is encouraged by the advancement in the House of legislation to add prescription drug coverage to Medicare. Relief from the high cost of drugs is long overdue. Our members and all older Americans and their families expect and need legislation this year. We appreciate your efforts and leadership toward this end."

But they go on to say in the letter, in terms of a number of additional points, that they think certain areas need to be strengthened and perhaps some changes need to be made. For example, under low-income protections, they

say, "We are encouraged by the bill's inclusion of all Medicare beneficiaries, including dual eligibles." We spend \$43 billion over the next decade picking up these low-income seniors. We believe they should be classified as seniors first in the Federal Medicare program and not low-income first, as they currently are today.

But they go on to say that they are concerned because eligibility is limited by a restrictive assets test. And we took that letter to heart and we have examined that provision, notwithstanding the fact that the original bill doubled the assets provision under the SSI, Social Security provisions for low-income eligibility. The bill had doubled it. We examined it, we determined that perhaps we should go that extra mile. Under the bill before you today we have tripled it. We have tripled the SSI standards in terms of low-income protections. These are the kinds of exchanges that improved this legislation as we move forward.

And let me say lastly that I am very pleased that the Senate, I believe, will pass legislation and join the House finally in conference to craft a piece of legislation that will become law. Mr. Speaker, I understand the rules of the House in terms of the very narrow line we must tread, and I am not allowed to mention a Senator, but just let me say that a senior Senator, who has been a leader in health care debate for a number of years, frankly needs to be commended, because without his courageous step forward I do not believe the Senate would have moved as quickly or as rapidly as they have to a conclusion on their legislation.

I have enjoyed my conversations that I have had with him over the years, obviously more frequently as I have moved into a position to help effect adding prescription drugs to Medicare. Although we have profound differences in terms of our view oftentimes of the role of the Federal Government and assistance, we have never ever left the focus of policy, and although we may differ, the differences have always been over policy.

Never, ever has he mentioned Jim Jones, Kool-aid, mass suicide. Never, ever in our discussions has he mentioned the Holocaust. Never, ever has he mentioned blacks or slavery. He has always carried on the discussion on the basis of substance and the differences that we have on substance and the fact that in this society, in this civil society, the debate ought to be over choices of a legislative nature rather than trying to create an atmosphere of fear. For that I am grateful for his friendship and the fact that we will meet in conference and, finally, seniors, who are the last bastion of paying the price of retail for drugs, that will no longer be the case. And for that, all of us will be grateful. Policy will have triumphed over politics.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.